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Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. By its resolution 2391 (2017) of 8 December 2017, the Security Council welcomed the progress achieved in making the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel fully operational and requested me to take the steps necessary to conclude a technical agreement between the United Nations, the European Union and the States members of Group of Five for the Sahel (G-5 Sahel), with a view to providing operational and logistical support to the Joint Force through the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

2. The Council also requested me, in close coordination with the States members of G-5 Sahel and the African Union, to report on the activities of the Joint Force, focusing on progress in making it operational, international support for it, the implementation of the technical agreement, challenges encountered and the implementation by the G-5 Sahel countries of a human rights and international humanitarian law compliance framework and the human rights due diligence policy.

II. Operationalization of the Joint Force

3. Pursuant to resolution 2391 (2017), the States members of G-5 Sahel, the United Nations and the European Union, at the margins of the international high-level conference for the Sahel, held in Brussels on 23 February 2018, signed a technical agreement defining the scope and scale of United Nations support for the Joint Force through MINUSMA. Under the resolution, the support comprises medical evacuations, access to life-support consumables (fuel, water and rations), the use of United Nations engineering plant equipment and material, and assistance to be provided by uniformed MINUSMA engineering enabling units in the preparation of the Joint Force's operational bases in Mali. The support will be provided to Joint Force elements operating on Malian territory, in line with the Mission's mandated area of operations. The European Union and the United Nations also signed a separate financial agreement on the modalities for transferring funds between them.

4. Efforts by the G-5 Sahel countries to make the Joint Force fully operational continued. On 8 January, the ministers for foreign affairs and ministers of defence of those countries attended an extraordinary ministerial meeting in Bamako, which resulted in the creation of a dedicated trust fund for the Joint Force and the

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establishment of the Defence and Security Bureau, which will coordinate and liaise with the headquarters of the Joint Force in Sévaré, Mali, and the Group's permanent secretariat in Nouakchott. On 6 and 7 February, the Heads of State of the Group met for their annual summit in Niamey, during which its acting presidency was rotated from Mali to the Niger. The Heads of State endorsed the outcomes of the January ministerial meeting and subsequently, under the acting presidency of the Niger, requested assistance from the United Nations in enhancing the capacities of the permanent secretariat and in setting up the trust fund. On 23 March, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, at its 759th meeting, decided to extend the deployment of the Joint Force by 12 months, effective 12 April 2018.

5. The security situation in the Sahel, as described in detail in my previous report on the matter (S/2017/869), continues to worsen. A large-scale terrorist attack in the heart of Ouagadougou on 2 March, continual attacks on defence and security forces in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger and an attack, unprecedented in duration, sophistication and scope, on forces of the French Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA on 14 April in Timbuktu, Mali, bear witness to the trend. State authority remains absent in large areas of central and northern Mali and in northern Burkina Faso. The local population lacks access to basic social services and continues to suffer from poverty and hunger. The underlying root causes of instability, in particular weak political, financial and security governance, under-development and exclusion, remain unchanged and largely unaddressed. The presidential elections due to be held in Mali in July 2018 will be a decisive moment in shaping the future of that country and could have a significant impact on the region.

A. Deployment update: military component

6. The Joint Force reached its initial operational capability in October 2017 and is projected to become fully operational in the coming months. As at 13 April, six out of a total of seven battalions had been identified by States members of the Group. Two thirds of the troops designated for the Central Sector have reportedly deployed: 130 out of 650 troops of the Mali battalion in Boulikessi, 528 out of 650 troops of the Niger battalion in Bankilaré and 596 out of 650 troops of the Burkina Faso battalion in Dori. The Joint Force will define new timelines for becoming fully operational once the relevant criteria have been established and approved by the chiefs of defence staff of countries of the Group at the next meeting of the Defence and Security Committee, which were to be held on 10 and 11 May in Ouagadougou. The Committee will also establish timelines for the transfer of authority over the individual battalions from Group countries to the Joint Force's central command.

7. The Commander of the Joint Force, Brigadier General Didier Dacko, conducted an initial assessment visit to the Central Sector, supported by the Barkhane force, from 4 to 9 April to determine compliance with deployment requirements. The visit, along with an inspection visit to Sector East and Sector West headquarters, had initially been scheduled for late 2017, but had to be postponed owing to a lack of means of transport. His findings are expected to be approved in late April. A second assessment visit in Sector East to Wour, Chad, and Madama, Niger, is ongoing.

8. The Joint Force's headquarters and central command post in Sévaré and the three sector headquarters, in Niamey (Central Sector), in Wour, Chad (Sector East), and in Nbeiket el Ahouach, Mauritania (Sector West), have reached 80 per cent of their staffing capacity. Initial assessments of human resources, however, had to be revised and the staffing ceilings for the four command posts have been adjusted accordingly. The central command post is expected to be reinforced by 120 additional staff officers and the three sector headquarters would require a total of 64 additional

posts. The Defence and Security Committee is expected to confirm the exact number of additional posts required at its May meeting.

9. At their extraordinary summit, held in Bamako on 2 July 2017, the Heads of State of the G-5 Sahel countries decided to prioritize the operationalization of the Joint Force in the Central Sector, as the majority of terrorist attacks were being carried out in that region. Since then, the Joint Force has conducted two military operations in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger. In Operation Hawbi, which was carried out from 28 October to 11 November, three inter-army detachments under Joint Force command coordinated with the armed forces of Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger, and with the Barkhane force. The central command post in Sévaré directed the operation with the support of the tactical command post in Niamey.

10. From 30 December 2017 to 15 January 2018, the Joint Force conducted Operation Pagnali in the forest area between Tofagala, Ouoromana and Serba, close to Boulikessi, in Mali. The objective was to destroy the supply chains of armed terrorist groups and to contain their movements in the border area between Mali and Burkina Faso. Four tactical inter-army combat units and nine aircraft from those two countries participated in the operation.

11. The Joint Force is preparing its operational plan, which is expected to be approved at the next meeting of the Defence and Security Committee in early May.

12. On 29 January, the Group's permanent secretariat and Brigadier General Dacko met representatives of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and other United Nations agencies, funds and programmes in Nouakchott. They agreed to work together to build capacity in the areas of civil-military coordination, gender mainstreaming, human rights, social cohesion and conflict management.

13. The Joint Force also identified the building of two new sites in Boulikessi and Tessit, the rehabilitation of camps in Guiré, Nampala, Ngoumacoura and the enhancement of its headquarters in Sévaré as priority construction projects. The precarious conditions in and around those sites present a major security threat and are delaying the deployment of remaining troops. Building bunkers in the camps to protect personnel, arms, ammunition, equipment and supplies is a key priority. Until camp infrastructure in Nbeiket el Ahouach and Wour is improved, the command posts for Sector West and Sector East are temporarily located in Néma, Mauritania, and N'Djamena, respectively. Given the lack of transport assets, the distances between the sector headquarters, command posts and battalion camps constitute a major challenge.

14. The Joint Force urgently requires air assets for gathering intelligence and transport, as well as communications equipment. It currently relies on the national armies of the G-5 Sahel countries or the Barkhane force to conduct reconnaissance missions. Communications equipment is in short supply and the different systems used by the G-5 Sahel countries are not always compatible or encrypted. The lack of expertise, training and equipment for detecting and mitigating the threat of mines is also a source of great concern, in particular given the asymmetrical threat posed in the areas in which the Joint Force operates. It also requires assistance with developing outreach and communication strategies to target the population in its area of operations.

15. On 2 March, Brigadier General Dacko requested technical assistance from the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to meet the asymmetrical threat posed by improvised explosive devices. His request envisages the provision of advice and assistance by the Mine Action Service in order to strengthen the military and civilian

capacity in the countries concerned and at headquarters in Sévaré. An assessment of how to provide such support is currently under way.

B. Deployment update: police and civilian component

16. In addition to the military component, comprising 5,000 elements, the strategic concept of operations of the Joint Force, referred to in resolution 2359 (2017) and previously endorsed by the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, includes a police and civilian component.

17. In December 2017, the Government of Mali, in its capacity as acting president of the Group, supported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), held a workshop in Bamako to define the role and responsibilities of the police component, in particular with regard to provost and judicial police. A conceptual framework for the structure and operation of the police component was adopted at an extraordinary meeting of the Defence and Security Committee on 8 December.

18. Under the conceptual framework, the police component will consist of a provost police unit, integrated into the military component of the Joint Force, and an investigation unit under the command of national specialized units combating terrorism and transnational organized crime. The core responsibilities of the provost police will include monitoring military units and providing them with training on human rights and upholding the rule of law. The investigation units will be responsible for the collection, analysis and exchange of information and for investigating crimes, gathering evidence and pursuing criminals and the perpetrators of human rights violations. The police component will also include a police adviser to the Joint Force Commander, appointed by States members of the Group on a rotating basis for a term of one year, renewable once, and supported by a secretariat and liaison officers to coordinate with the Security Cooperation Platform, the Sahelian Threat Analysis and Early Warning Centre and the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL). The police adviser will monitor the development of legal frameworks in the Sahel, advise the Joint Force Commander on legal aspects of operations, anticipate legal issues and their solutions and assist the Commander in the coordination of cross-border operations by facilitating the exchange of information between investigation units. In operational matters, the police adviser will monitor and analyse threats relating to terrorism and transnational organized crime, facilitate the collection and exchange of information between investigation units, participate in planning operations and provide the Commander with police expertise and information relating to the judicial police. He or she will also be tasked with centralizing data on arrests.

19. The conceptual framework requires strict compliance with international law provisions regarding the treatment of persons suspected of terrorism or other criminal acts, the integration of the women and peace and security agenda into the work of the police component and measures for protecting children. It also stipulates that the work of the police component should comply strictly with human rights and international humanitarian law and with the human rights compliance framework of the Joint Force.

20. From 10 to 12 April, the Government of the Niger, supported by UNODC, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and other international partners, held a workshop in Niamey on making the police component operational, with the aim of defining the component's scale and scope, including the number of police officers to be deployed in total and within each battalion. Participants agreed to entrust the Director General of the National Police of the Niger with the task of establishing a commission composed of States members of the Group, UNODC and

other international partners to determine the specific needs of each of those States in creating the police component and to assist them with setting up its investigation and provost units as soon as possible.

21. In order to ensure due process and in line with the strategic concept of operations, investigative police units deployed to the Joint Force will be required to work with national authorities in each of the G-5 Sahel countries. In Mali, the Specialized Judicial Unit to Combat Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime has exclusive jurisdiction over those matters. To avoid jurisdictional conflict, terrorism and organized crime suspects apprehended by the Joint Force in Mali will be handed over to the Unit, which will thus play a key role in ensuring that such suspects are properly investigated and brought to justice in Mali, in accordance with human rights standards. The Unit will also be responsible for implementing all judicial cooperation requests from other G-5 Sahel countries.

C. Permanent secretariat and institutional framework

22. On 6 February, at their fourth annual summit, the Heads of State of the G-5 Sahel countries endorsed the appointment of Maman Sidikou as the Group's new permanent secretary. Mr. Sidikou, of the Niger, replaced Najim Elhadj Mohamed, who held the post for three years.

23. Pursuant to resolution 2391 (2017), UNOWAS is mandated to provide technical assistance, within its existing mandate and as its resources permit, to the permanent secretariat of the Group with a view to enhancing cooperation between G-5 Sahel countries in the areas of security, governance and development. In line with that mandate and pursuant to the decision reached by the Group's Heads of State at their annual summit in February, UNOWAS is supporting the establishment of the secretariat's Defence and Security Bureau in Nouakchott, thereby restructuring the secretariat and broadening its responsibilities. Staff for the Bureau will be provided by countries of the Group. Burkina Faso and Mali have each nominated defence and security assistants and Mauritania has designated a secretary. Those posts will be staffed and financed by States members of the Group on a one-year rotating basis.

24. The Group's Council of Ministers has approved the standard operating procedures of the Joint Force trust fund and the terms of reference for its support and steering committees. States members of the Group are expected to make nominations for positions in the fund's secretariat, which will be led by a coordinator and staffed with technical personnel in areas such as finance, partnerships management, procurement and supply chain management.

25. On 23 March, at the margins of the extraordinary summit of the African Union in Kigali, representatives of the G-5 Sahel countries signed a memorandum of understanding with the Peace and Security Council of the African Union on the provision of equipment and technical and financial support to make the Joint Force fully operational. In the memorandum, measures are outlined for enhancing coordination between the permanent secretariat and the African Union, including through the establishment of a strategic coordination cell in Addis Ababa to provide technical assistance for the Joint Force trust fund and to mobilize resources.

D. Human rights due diligence policy and human rights compliance framework

26. In resolution 2391 (2017), the Security Council underlined the need for Joint Force operations to be conducted in full compliance with international law and for

G-5 Sahel countries and the Joint Force to take steps to minimize the risk of harm to civilians in all areas of operation. It also called upon the States members of G-5 Sahel to establish a robust compliance framework to prevent, investigate, address and publicly report violations and abuses of human rights law and violations of international humanitarian law relating to the Joint Force. It also noted that the implementation of United Nations support is to be undertaken in strict compliance with the human rights due diligence policy on United Nations support to non-United Nations security forces.

27. On the basis of previous experience and lessons learned in Afghanistan and Somalia, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in consultation with the Joint Force and other relevant United Nations offices and departments, developed a compliance framework that was endorsed through the signature of the technical agreement by the United Nations, the European Union and the States members of G-5 Sahel at the Brussels conference on 23 February. The main elements of the framework are outlined in the agreement. The framework provides for a set of risk-reduction and mitigation mechanisms designed to prevent and address the possible adverse effects of the Joint Force's operations on local communities. They include but are not limited to: the screening of troops and personnel to ensure that they are selected, recorded and identifiable as belonging to the Joint Force and its operations; generalized and specific training for troops and personnel, before and during deployment, relevant to the operations; the adoption and dissemination of rules and regulations and standard operating procedures for the conduct of operations by the Joint Force; a mechanism to ensure that operations planning takes into account the requirements of human rights and international humanitarian law and protection concerns, including measures specific to women and children; mechanisms for conducting after-action reviews to assess the impact of operations on civilians and human rights; mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on the conduct of operations by the Joint Force, including casualty and incident tracking and analysis and reporting on the implementation of the compliance framework; and the creation of effective accountability processes in the countries of the Group to address violations.

28. In response to a request by the Group for support in implementing the compliance framework, OHCHR, MINUSMA and other partners are finalizing an operational support plan that will include technical assistance to the Joint Force in Sévaré, mobile monitoring of the Joint Force's operations and technical assistance and monitoring of follow-up actions taken in response to allegations of human rights abuses in each of the Group's member States. A plan to reinforce the capacity of the Mission to ensure that United Nations support provided to the Joint Force complies with the human rights due diligence policy is also being finalized. Such compliance is a prerequisite for United Nations support provided pursuant to resolution 2391 (2017).

29. Pending finalization of the costing and disbursement of donor contributions for the establishment of the compliance framework, the Peacebuilding Fund provided critical seed funding of $590,640, enabling OHCHR to deploy technical experts to Mopti and Sévaré to develop the framework with the Joint Force's central command and work with national authorities and United Nations partners on its implementation in G-5 Sahel countries. Support for the Joint Force in terms of upholding human rights and international humanitarian law will require a sustained commitment by Member States and donors of political and financial resources over the entire course of its deployment. The presence of a civilian component in the Joint Force with which the United Nations and other partners can engage will be essential for putting many aspects of the framework into practice. For the framework to fulfil its potential as a tool for protecting populations and become a model for future operations, support will

need to be sustained beyond the current round of projected funding for its implementation so as to ensure its maintenance in the long term.

30. During the reporting period, MINUSMA continued to monitor the human rights situation in Mali, including in relation to the activities and operations of the Joint Force. In a letter dated 20 January 2018, the Joint Force formally notified the Mission of a case that occurred in connection with Operation Pagnali, in which it is alleged that a 51-year-old man was killed and a 29-year-old woman was injured when a Joint Force patrol opened fire in a residential area during an altercation with assailants. The Mission is investigating the incident. The Joint Force also offered to cooperate fully with an investigation by the police in Sévaré into the matter.

31. Operation Hawbi led to the arrest and detention, on 7 November 2017, of nine members of the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, initially suspected as terrorists. The Joint Force transferred them to the custody of the police in Gao two days later. They were released on 12 November for lack of evidence.

32. In December and January, nationals of Burkina Faso reportedly fled to Gossi, in the Timbuktu region of Mali, to escape security operations led by forces of Burkina Faso in the border area. As at 28 February, 2,373 refugees from Burkina Faso had been registered by the authorities in Mali, supported by representatives of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. More remain to be registered. The internal displacement of 9,534 Malian nationals in the Timbuktu region was also highlighted in the displacement tracking matrix of the Ministry of Solidarity and Humanitarian Action in Mali. At present, there is no indication as to whether the displacement occurred as a result of operations by the Joint Force or other defence and security forces.

E. Issues and challenges

33. Progress in making the Joint Force fully operational and mobilizing international funding for its support has been slow and, at times, cumbersome. Initially, it was due to be fully operational by March 2018, but the deadline has been set back. A variety of factors are contributing to the delay. The rate of deployment has been slowed by major deficiencies in terms of training and equipment and the fact that the national defence and security forces in G-5 Sahel countries are already overstretched.

34. The lack of progress in the peace process in Mali, combined with the deteriorating security situation, can only fuel further radicalization, especially among vulnerable groups. The success of the Joint Force's future operations is, however, intimately linked to progress in the peace process. Security operations must complement efforts to provide the civilian population with a tangible peace dividend. At the same time, the Joint Force could provide an important bulwark against the spread of violent extremism, terrorism and transnational organized crime when fully operational. That, however, would also require the full implementation of the human rights compliance framework with a view to preventing and mitigating any adverse impact of operations on civilians.

35. It is important that the G-5 Sahel countries intensify efforts to create unity of purpose and develop a shared vision and a sound political framework for the Joint Force. That requires a further revision of the strategic concept of operations, as recommended in my previous report. It also requires an intensified dialogue with the international community to mobilize the requisite support for such an endeavour and to ensure that all key partners are aligned in their support.

III. International support for the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel

A. Political support

36. Following the adoption of resolution 2391 (2017), a series of high-level meetings were conducted to mobilize international support for the Joint Force. On 11 December, European Union ministers for foreign affairs met their counterparts from States members of G-5 Sahel in Brussels. Two days later, the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, and the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, had a high-level meeting with the Heads of State of the Group and other leaders in La Celle-Saint-Cloud, France. The matters of funding and measures of international support for the Joint Force were discussed at both meetings. On 8 January, ministers of defence and ministers for foreign affairs of the G-5 Sahel countries met in Bamako and announced the creation of a trust fund and the establishment of the Defence and Security Bureau. The need for the complementarity of funding mechanisms and effective communication and coordination between the European Union coordination hub and the Group was emphasized at a meeting of the ministers of defence of the Group's member States hosted by the Government of France on 15 January in Paris. At the summit of the Heads of State of the Group, held in Niamey on 6 February, timelines for the deployment of the Joint Force were approved. On 23 February, the technical agreement on MINUSMA support for the Joint Force and the financial agreement between the United Nations and the European Union were signed at the Brussels conference. On 23 March, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union extended the mandate of the Joint Force mandate for another year. On 25 April, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations hosted a high-level meeting in New York, co-chaired by the Group, the European Union and the United Nations, to mobilize additional donor support for the Joint Force. Donors were urged to make funds available for MINUSMA engineering support for the Joint Force, given the serious lack of equipment in the Joint Force and the dire conditions in and around their operational bases.

37. The flurry of high-level meetings underlines the ownership by the Group of the Joint Force and its activities and the sustained interest and commitment of the international community to rally behind this important cause. Discussions were, however, dominated by practical concerns with regard to the implementation of the technical agreement and efforts to mobilize funds. In resolution 2391 (2017), the importance of the link between the peace process in Mali, the stabilization role of MINUSMA and the support it will provide to the Joint Force are emphasized, but little attention was paid during the reporting period to a broader political framework for the Joint Force. The strengthening of the Group's permanent secretariat, creation of the Defence and Security Bureau and signature of the memorandum of understanding between the African Union and the Group are important steps towards situating the operations of the Joint Force in a broader political and institutional framework for a holistic and comprehensive approach to addressing the challenges facing the Sahel. No progress was made during the reporting period, however, on establishing a support group that, in line with paragraphs 4 to 6 of resolution 2391 (2017), could bring together the Governments of the Group's member States, regional stakeholders, donors and technical partners, centralize support efforts and define the overall vision for and future direction of the Joint Force.

B. Financial support and efforts to mobilize resources

1. European Union coordination hub

38. At the request of several of its member States, the European Union established a coordination hub, led by the European Union Military Staff, in November 2017 to coordinate support in the international donor community for the Joint Force. It holds regular meetings attended by representatives of the member States of the Union and other States, including Canada, Japan, Norway, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the United States of America, and of international organizations. The hub liaises with key G-5 Sahel stakeholders, such as its presidency and permanent secretariat, the Commander of the Joint Force and the African Union, through the Union's delegations and its common security and defence policy missions in the Sahel. The hub is first and foremost a tool for the countries of the Group and the international donor community to mobilize support as efficiently and effectively as possible.

2. African Peace Facility

39. The African Peace Facility is a mechanism of the European Union through which international voluntary contributions may be channelled to the Joint Force. Through it, the Union has been involved in efforts to make the Joint Force operational from its inception, initially with a contribution of €50 million for the provision of services, infrastructure and equipment. At the Brussels conference, the Union increased its contribution to €100 million and broadened coverage to include funding for MINUSMA assistance to the Joint Force (€10 million), efforts by OHCHR to implement the compliance framework (€10 million) and the Group's governance structure (€5 million).

3. International high-level donor conference for the Sahel

40. At the Brussels conference, member States of the European Union and other countries pledged €88 million in support of the Joint Force, bringing all pledges received to date to a total of €414 million. The G-5 Sahel had estimated the total cost for the start-up and first year of operations of the Joint Force at €423 million. Some pledges have not been earmarked, and the disbursement of most pledges is still pending.

4. Operational and logistical support

41. In January and February, negotiations took place in Niamey, Bamako and Nouakchott to conclude a tripartite agreement defining the scope and modalities for reimbursing MINUSMA for its support for the Joint Force, pursuant to resolution 2391 (2017). The support for the Joint Force by the Mission under the technical agreement of 23 February is to be provided within a broader political framework of efforts aimed at supporting the peace process in Mali and stabilization efforts throughout the Sahel. The support is directed at the defence and security forces of the States members of G-5 Sahel participating in operations of the Joint Force on Malian territory and requires the application of the human rights due diligence policy.

42. MINUSMA support is provided subject to the full reimbursement of the United Nations through a financing mechanism coordinated by the European Union. The financial agreement between the Union and United Nations, a Pillar Assessed Grant or Delegation Agreement, provides for the payment of €10 million through the African Peace Facility and constitutes the financial framework in which the modalities for reimbursement are set forth. On the basis of an initial needs assessment carried out by the Mission and the Joint Force, the cost of the support is estimated at

approximately $44 million over two years. In the absence of pledges to cover the full cost, initial assistance will be limited to life-support consumables and casualty evacuation. The Mission has made all the necessary arrangements to provide such support, upon request by the Joint Force, and will begin to do so upon receipt of the funds contributed by the European Union. The Mission has also conducted initial assessments on the capabilities and material needed to provide engineering assistance within its capacity and to ensure that such support can be provided as soon as resources become available.

43. The Joint Force has identified the enhancement and fortification of six camps in Mali as a priority (see para. 13). The Mission undertook a reconnaissance visit to the Tessit site on 12 April and assessment visits to the remaining five sites, including Sévaré, between 26 and 28 April. Costs are estimated at an average of $600,000 per hectare for construction according to United Nations standards. In line with initial assessments and pending the outcome of the reconnaissance visits and availability of the necessary funding, Mission engineers envisage the construction of three 4-ha and two 10-ha camps and rehabilitation of the Joint Force's main headquarters at a total cost of $19.5 million.

44. The Mission set up an internal coordination group made up of civilian, police and military components in December 2017 to plan, assess and review the needs of the Joint Force. At the Mission's initiative, a tripartite mechanism with the Joint Force and the European Union was created in January 2018 as a platform to determine at regular meetings how to implement the technical and financial agreements.

45. The Mission has prepared a provisional annual support plan with standard operating procedures for implementing the technical agreement and a logistics expert has been assigned to Sévaré to coordinate with the Joint Force. The Force is developing, with assistance from the European Union military mission to contribute to the training of the Malian Armed Forces and the Barkhane force, an annual operational plan that will be submitted for approval at the next meeting of the Defence and Security Committee. The Mission will then align its support plan with Joint Force's operational plan. The Mission stands ready to recruit additional civilian capacity to provide the agreed support when additional resources become available.

46. In line with resolutions 2364 (2017) and 2391 (2017), the Mission and the Joint Force have each assigned one military liaison officer to the other's headquarters to facilitate information sharing and coordination within their respective mandates. The Mission has also established a forward command post in Sévaré.

5. Bilateral support

47. Several countries are providing bilateral assistance to the Joint Force and to the armed and security forces of the G-5 Sahel countries to complement border control and counter-terrorism efforts. The Barkhane force assisted with the planning and conduct of the Joint Force's first operations. Following its pledge of $60 million in support of the Group, announced on 30 October 2017, the United States is providing training and a technical support package to the Joint Force and logistics and engineering support to the armed forces of Burkina Faso. In addition, the United States Africa Command will assign two planners to the Joint Force's Central Sector headquarters. At the high-level meeting held in La Celle-Saint-Cloud on 13 December 2017, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates pledged $100 million and $30 million respectively to support the Joint Force. Further pledges were made by bilateral partners during the Brussels conference but have not yet materialized.

IV. Support options going forward

48. In my previous report, I presented four options for United Nations support for the Joint Force, ranging from the establishment of a dedicated United Nations office to support the provision of aid by MINUSMA, limited to the territory of Mali and relying on the Mission's existing logistics and supply chains. Resolution 2391 (2017) and the technical agreement align with the latter option.

49. In the present report, I will again put forward two options for more extensive and comprehensive United Nations support, using assessed contributions. Enhancing the role of the United Nations in providing support to the Joint Force through assessed contributions would allow for more predictable financing and thereby facilitate more precise, efficient and longer term planning, while also strengthening the strategic and tactical partnership with the Joint Force.

50. The first option would comprise a support package delivered by a dedicated United Nations support office, akin to the United Nations Support Office in Somalia for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). As in the case of AMISOM, the payment of salaries and stipends should not be assumed to be a component of the support package. However, support could be developed to include, exceptionally, the reimbursement of major contingent-owned equipment and the reimbursement of basic and essential supplies and services required to allow Joint Force contingents to sustain themselves. If mandated accordingly, the areas of operations of such a support office would cover the entire territory of the G-5 Sahel countries and mirror the area of operations of the Joint Force, once it reaches phase two of its strategic concept of operations. A support package mandated by the Security Council and a support office separate from MINUSMA could cover the types of support outlined in paragraph 47 of my previous report, including but not limited to: aeromedical evacuation capacity and related medical support; life-support services, including rations, fuel and water adapted to the requirements of the Joint Force; consumables, including field defence stores, first aid kits, tactical tentage, accommodation materiel and medical supplies; technical assistance to mitigate the threat posed by improvised explosive devices; technical support to apply and implement compliance frameworks, including the human rights due diligence policy; capacity for managing its environmental footprint; maintenance contracts, geospatial, telecommunications and information technology and infrastructure support.

51. The second option would entail adjusting the mandate of the Mission to enhance its support for the Joint Force and providing it with additional resources to establish more permanent support structures and mechanisms. Such enhanced support could include the elements already authorized under resolution 2391 (2017): medical and casualty evacuation; access to life-support consumables (fuel, water and rations); the use of United Nations engineering plant equipment and material; and uniformed MINUSMA engineering enabling units to assist in the preparation of Joint Force operational bases in Mali (para. 13 (b)). It could also be expanded to include other types of support not covered by other partners. Support would be limited to the Central and West sectors, whereas bilateral partners should focus their support role on sector East, where the United Nations has no proximate presence. This option bears the risk of Mission overstretch, given its comprehensive and multidimensional mandate. Moreover, since the Joint Force is not yet fully operational and the Mission has yet to begin implementing its current support measures, no assessment of the impact of this second option on the Mission and the implementation of its core mandate is available. The creation of a dedicated support office as outlined above would allow for a clearer distinction between the Mission's role in support of the peace process in Mali and that of assisting the Joint Force.

V. Broader challenges in the Sahel

52. Making the Joint Force fully operational is one of several parallel initiatives to tackle the root causes of instability in the Sahel. Given the rapidly deteriorating security situation in the area, a security-centred approach to countering the spread of violent extremism, terrorism and transnational organized crime is necessary. It should, however, form part of a broader, holistic vision. A key challenge in the months to come will be to ensure that the Joint Force's operations fall within a comprehensive strategy for the Sahel that is owned and directed by all the Sahel countries, beyond those that make up the G-5 Sahel, and backed by bilateral, regional and multilateral partners.

A. Priority investment programme

53. The G-5 Sahel is completing a review of its priority investment programme, integrating new projects and taking into account other regional frameworks. Responding to a formal request from the Group's permanent secretariat, the United Nations Development Programme sent an expert to the secretariat to assist it in recalibrating the investment programme, thereby ensuring alignment with the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel, and to develop a set of tools and strategic documents. The review should lead to an increase in the number of projects to be presented to donors at a round table meeting scheduled for December. It also encompasses ongoing projects in the Sahel and new cross-border projects proposed by Chad and the Niger.

B. United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel

54. The United Nations is working to recalibrate its integrated strategy for the Sahel, which will be implemented in partnership with the 10 countries identified under the strategy, including those of the G-5 Sahel, and aligned with their national and regional priorities. A support plan for the Sahel is also being developed to trigger investment and mobilize further resources in the region. More detailed information will be provided in June in my report on the activities of UNOWAS.

55. On 21 March, I appointed Ibrahim Thiaw as my Special Adviser for the Sahel, who will support my Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel and Head of UNOWAS in recalibrating the strategy and developing the support plan for the Sahel. Mr. Thiaw's national, regional and international experience will lend strength to efforts to serve millions of people in one of the world's most complex areas and contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development there.

56. On 15 March, my Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel attended the sixth meeting of the Ministerial Coordination Platform for the Sahel in N'Djamena, which was organized with the support of UNOWAS and the African Union Mission for Mali and the Sahel. The need for a holistic approach to challenges in the region, combining security concerns with development priorities, was emphasized at the meeting. The High Representative of the Mission, Pierre Buyoya, stressed the need to maintain the Platform as a unique forum for discussions involving all stakeholders. The Platform is the highest-level regionally owned mechanism for enhancing consistency between the multilayered regional strategies for the Sahel and national and local strategies.

C. Regional, subregional and national initiatives

57. On 28 March, the Deputy Secretary-General attended the Strategic Consultative Meeting on the Sahel in Nouakchott, organized by the African Union. The meeting provided an opportunity to discuss security and development efforts driven by the countries, people and institutions of the subregion and to ensure alignment with similar efforts by the African Union, the European Union, the United Nations and other international partners. The Deputy Secretary-General underlined the need to increase the investment of the United Nations in the Sahel, which had been less than optimal in comparison with its investment in other areas facing similar levels of fragility and instability. That investment should be directed at priority areas identified in the process of recalibrating the strategy for the Sahel: economic growth; governance and the rule of law; youth, women and girls; and climate change. It should also be used to expand livelihood options and boost access to basic goods and services. She emphasized that the United Nations should work hand-in-hand with the African Union in addressing challenges in the Sahel, and that their pursuit of common aims would be facilitated by frameworks on peace and security and development signed by them recently.

58. The flow of illicit drugs and firearms and the movement of terrorists in the Sahel have flourished along traditional trade and migration routes, adversely affecting security, good governance and development. In that context, UNODC plans to help Governments in the Sahel to improve the accessibility, efficiency and accountability of their criminal justice systems by providing legislative, criminal justice and law enforcement advisory services and technical assistance and promoting regional and international cooperation. With the assistance of UNODC, the authorities in Mali have seized 1.7 tons of drugs since 2017. Inter-service joint airport interdiction task forces have been set up and trained in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger. As a result, a total of 35 kg of drugs was seized at international airports in the Sahel and more than $1 million in foreign currencies was confiscated in 2017.

59. A great number of firearms are in circulation in West and Central Africa, as a result of the numerous conflicts in the region. UNODC works with national authorities to address the issue in various ways: assisting with the harmonization of their legislation with the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime; providing support for efforts to mark, collect and destroy firearms; improving security and effective record-keeping with regard to firearms; training criminal justice personnel; and building investigative and prosecutorial capacity to deal with trafficking in firearms. UNODC has provided the authorities in Burkina Faso and Mali with registration software for marking equipment for use with State-owned firearms, resulting in the marking of more than 13,500 firearms in those countries since 2015.

60. UNODC supports the strengthening of legislative and policy frameworks to build the capacity of the authorities in G-5 Sahel countries to investigate cases of trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants, to identify and protect the victims and to improve data collection on the nature and scale of the phenomenon, and works to enhance cooperation at the national, regional and international levels. With UNODC technical assistance, police academy instructors in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger have approved training manuals on combating trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants.

61. Reform of the security sector is under way in several countries of the Group. Not all of the Group's member States have units for combating transnational organized crime. In Burkina Faso, a special counter-terrorism service is being

established. The senior security sector reform adviser deployed there by the United Nations and financed by the Peacebuilding Fund supported a needs assessment of the sector, promoted synergies between the defence and security forces and advocated the streamlining of rule of law and democratic governance procedures. On 24 October 2017, my Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel attended the opening of a three-day national security forum in Ouagadougou, organized with the support of UNOWAS and the United Nations country team, during which the key elements of a new national security policy were identified. The forum was preceded by regional consultations to ensure an inclusive and participatory process.

62. In addition to the limited capacity of the security sector in the countries of the Group, the many overlapping agreements in the region on police and judicial cooperation put in place by the Economic Community of West African States, the Economic Community of Central African States and the Group itself raise the question of which framework should form the legal basis for cross-border operations by the Joint Force.

63. The Peacebuilding Fund is implementing a cross-border project in the Liptako-Gourma area to complement operations by the security forces there. The project, with $3 million in funding, is aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism, including through socioeconomic activities for young people and women at risk, support for local conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms, with a focus on farming conflicts, and the promotion of dialogue between the civilian population and the defence and security forces.

64. In Mali, MINUSMA and the United Nations country team are working to strengthen the rule of law by supporting the restoration and expansion of State authority throughout the country, including through the redeployment and activation of justice institutions. Such programmes contribute to creating mutually reinforcing environments for the Joint Force and MINUSMA, by strengthening the nexus between peace, development and security initiatives. The Mission's stabilization mandate specifically provides an opportunity for creating space to address the root causes of instability in the region, while security operations focus on the immediate manifestations of that instability: violent extremism, terrorism and transnational organized crime.

VI. Observations

65. I applaud the G-5 Sahel countries for their steadfast determination to make their vision succeed. I commend them for their continued efforts to mobilize and deploy their troops and for the conduct of the Joint Force's first two operations. I extend my gratitude to the international community, which has rallied together behind this important initiative and made such generous contributions to the Joint Force. Now, however, support must materialize in a more concrete and tangible manner.

66. In just one year, since the Peace and Security Council of the African Union authorized the deployment of the Joint Force, considerable progress has been made in mobilizing resources and support for it. This, however, has yet to translate into progress in making it fully operational. Significant challenges and obstacles remain. The security situation in the Sahel continues to deteriorate. The heinous terrorist attacks in Ouagadougou and, most recently, in Timbuktu and the continued assaults on local armed and security forces demonstrate that terrorist groups are attempting to gain influence and expand their presence. State authorities are increasingly absent in northern and central Mali and northern Burkina Faso. The international community must take timely action to reverse those trends.

67. Against that backdrop, the Joint Force is not being brought to fully operational capability at the required speed. I urge the G-5 Sahel countries to deploy their remaining troops as quickly as possible and to resolve command and control issues. Delays in the transfer of authority over their battalions to the Joint Force Commander are also slowing down the process. The States members of the Group must initiate the transfer of authority as a matter of urgency. Otherwise, operations will continue to be conducted on an ad hoc basis, and longer-term planning, including with regard to the end state of the Joint Force, will be difficult, if not impossible. I further call upon the Group to clarify and finalize the strategic concept of operations and the criteria and timelines for achieving the Joint Force's full operational capability. At the same time, I acknowledge that the Joint Force cannot be the sole response to the security challenges in the Sahel. I extend my gratitude to the troops serving in the Barkhane force and the men and women of MINUSMA, whose presence remains critical.

68. Coordination between the Joint Force, the Barkhane force, MINUSMA and liaison mechanisms needs to be boosted to ensure that each mission contributes effectively to creating an enabling environment for all. I welcome the deployment of liaison officers and the establishment of the coordination mechanisms, pursuant to resolution 2391 (2017) and the technical agreement. I urge States members of the Group and the Joint Force to be as forthcoming as possible about their needs for assistance and updates regarding deployment timelines.

69. Lasting peace and stability in the Sahel can be achieved only if underlying political, financial and governance deficiencies are addressed, State presence is restored and expanded across the region and the entire population, especially vulnerable communities and young people, are able to benefit from basic social services and employment opportunities.

70. The Joint Force therefore needs to be firmly embedded within a broader political and institutional framework that can guide its operations and ensure that it constitutes just one of many elements of a regional strategy. While I am encouraged by steps taken in recent weeks to strengthen the Group's permanent secretariat, reinforce links between the African Union and the Group and ensure that the Joint Force is an integral part of the African Union Peace and Security Architecture, I strongly urge the countries of the Group to accelerate the establishment of a support group (see para. 37).

71. I welcome the fruitful collaboration between the States members of the Group, the European Union and the African Union, which resulted in the signature of the technical agreement. The European Union has played a critical role in mobilizing donor support and in managing financial contributions to the Joint Force, including for the establishment of the human rights compliance framework, through its coordination hub. I also express gratitude to my Special Representative for Mali, Annadif Mahamat Saleh, and all MINUSMA colleagues, who have spared no effort to ensure that the Mission stands ready to provide support to the Joint Force, whenever it is requested, within the confines of resolution 2391 (2017) and the technical agreement. However, the Mission can effectively provide support, especially life-support and medical evacuations, only once the Joint Force resumes operations.

72. I am deeply concerned about the lack of funding available to the Mission for the provision of engineering support to better fortify the camps of the Joint Force. That funding shortage could further delay progress in bringing the Joint Force to its full operational capability. I therefore call upon donors and partners to urgently mobilize the remaining resources needed to provide this support effectively.

73. The Mission's support is critical. It will, however, be limited to the territory of Mali. I therefore urge international donors and partners to prioritize support for

Sectors East and West, where the lack of infrastructure and resources is a serious impediment to making the Joint Force fully operational. I also call upon donors to disburse the amounts pledged at the Brussels conference and earlier. Announcements must now be translated into action.

74. I remain convinced that United Nations support for the Joint Force through assessed contributions is the best means of ensuring sustainable and predictable long-term financing and support measures for the Joint Force. The current arrangements are neither sustainable nor commensurate with the challenges we face in the Sahel. Once again, I urge the members of the Security Council to be ambitious and provide the Joint Force with the strong mandate that would bestow upon it the political legitimacy it deserves and provide G-5 Sahel and the United Nations with the resources required to accelerate and finalize the process of making the Joint Force fully operational.

75. Until then, I urge the G-5 Sahel countries and the European Union to intensify their collaboration and joint needs mapping to ensure a maximum of transparency and to avoid overlap and the duplication of efforts in the mobilization of additional resources. I commend the Group for creating its own trust fund for the Joint Force, which could constitute a crucial instrument for mobilizing additional resources and donor support, including for lethal equipment. The United Nations stands ready to assist with the establishment of the trust fund. I would like to emphasize, however, the need to work closely with the European Union coordination hub and strongly recommend moving the hub to Nouakchott so that both organizations might intensify their collaboration and joint resource mobilization efforts. I also encourage the countries of the Group to assume full ownership of those efforts, including for their own trust fund, and to work more closely in that regard with international donors and partners, including the African Union and European Union. Last but not least, I urge international donors and partners to increase their support for the Group's permanent secretariat.

76. The upcoming elections in Mali, if prepared and carried out well, will be an opportunity to foster political dialogue, strengthen democratic institutions and lay the foundations for an inclusive Malian nation-State in which the concerns of minorities and vulnerable groups are adequately addressed. That would send a strong political message and serve as a concrete contribution to the prevention of the spread of violent extremism in the region. I call upon all signatories to the peace agreement in Mali to spare no effort in working together to facilitate the holding of peaceful, fair and transparent presidential elections. Beyond the elections, progress in the peace process remains crucial and will determine the success of any regional stabilization efforts. I urge the signatory parties to accelerate the implementation of key provisions of the peace agreement prior to the presidential elections, to demonstrate their commitment to the peace process and, more importantly, to deliver tangible peace dividends to the long-suffering population. I recall that, pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017), any spoilers of the peace process may be subject to sanctions.